



## RESEARCH PAPER

### **Cultivating a whole of university response to Pasifika: Research in action for widened participation, retention and completion at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand**

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Pasifika students (students of Pacific nation descent) are participating more in tertiary education in New Zealand, but this is not being matched by necessary increases in retention, academic achievement or course and qualification completion. Moreover, while there is an emerging base of research literature on Pasifika student success in higher education, the relationship between this research and everyday university practice is less clear. This paper documents the 'research in action' undertaken at Victoria University of Wellington in order to listen to, understand, and actively respond to the real experiences of its Pasifika learners and their families, and to cultivate a whole of university response to widening Pasifika participation, retention and degree completion. The paper documents some of the most significant findings of the research, the collaborative process of developing and implementing the pan-university strategy it informed, and some of the modest but heartening outcomes at year three. In documenting this, the authors wish to encourage continued efforts to engage in 'research in action' by, with, for and through non-traditional student groups, such as Pasifika, at universities.

**Keywords:** widening participation; higher education; Pasifika; retention; degree completion; research in action equity groups

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#### **Introduction**

*Pasifika* is an umbrella term used in New Zealand to refer to peoples who trace their ancestry to the Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian nations of the Pacific Ocean. According to the 2013 census data, Pasifika peoples are the fourth largest major ethnic group in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2014, p.15), and make up about 7% of the total New Zealand population (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, n.d.). At The Victoria University of Wellington Pasifika make up just over 5% of the student population. Within this 5% there are diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritages. In 2013, over half of the University's Pasifika students self-identified as being of Samoan descent, a sixth identified with Cook Islands Māori heritage, roughly a tenth traced their ancestry to Fijian and Tongan descent, with smaller groups of Tokelauan and Niuean heritage students, and an even smaller remainder who identified with other Pacific heritages including Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Kiribati.

By 2026 it is projected that "Pacific people will be 10% of the population" (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, n.d.) in New Zealand. With more children between the ages of 0-14 years in the Pacific ethnic group than any other in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand,

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2014, p.15), Pasifika peoples' involvement in all levels of education in New Zealand is increasing and an increase in the demand by Pasifika for higher education is inevitable. However up to this point, like many New Zealand universities, The Victoria University of Wellington had reported widely varying levels of Pasifika student enrolment, achievement, retention and degree attainment, with considerable disparity between the results of Pasifika and their non-Pasifika peers. According to the Tertiary Education Commission (2013, p.2), "The level of Pasifika participation in tertiary education has increased yet course and qualification completion remains a critical issue especially at undergraduate and postgraduate levels".

This situation necessitates an immediate, informed, strategic response, and a commitment to nurturing the potential contribution of Pasifika peoples to New Zealand society, economy, politics, culture and the arts, sporting endeavours, and a wide range of academic fields. Van de Meer (2011, p. 1) cites Durie (2006), stating that "Māori and Pasifika achievement is not only of national social and economic importance, but is also considered the key to realisation of Pasifika and Māori potential". However the fact remains that, in spite of progress, Pasifika peoples "still have the second lowest proportion with degrees or higher qualifications" (Pasifika Education Plan 2013 - 2017, Ministry of Education, 2013).

A report on Pasifika in tertiary education in 2009 revealed that the most common fields of tertiary study included office, accountancy, sales, marketing and management-type studies, followed by arts and humanities-type subjects and teacher education (Ministry of Education, 2010, p.4). Similarly, at The Victoria University of Wellington, Pasifika students have typically been enrolled in highest numbers in the Humanities, Education, Commerce, and Law, while being under-represented in Science, Architecture and Design, Engineering and Music. Concerted efforts are being made nationwide to change these patterns and encourage the participation of Pasifika students in a wider range of disciplines. In addition to addressing widening *participation* issues, a stated objective of New Zealand's Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) is improving the *retention*, *success* and *degree completion* rates for Pasifika students in New Zealand universities. In consultation with the Tertiary Education Commission, Victoria University of Wellington's own Pasifika equity targets include: that a minimum of 4.6% of enrolled students will be Pasifika; that the Pasifika qualification completion rate will be 54.2% or above; that the Pasifika course completion rate will be 62.8% or above. These targets speak volumes for the prior and current general situation for Pasifika in higher education in New Zealand.

While there is an emerging base of research on Pasifika student success in higher education in New Zealand (such as Anae, et al., 2002; Coxon, et al., 2002; Fa'afoi & Fletcher, 2002; Benseman, et al., 2006; Airini, et al., 2009; Davidson-Toumu'a & Dunbar, 2009; Mara & Marsters, 2009; Chu, Abella & Paurini, 2013), the nexus between this research and the praxis within universities remains less clear. With the belief that the best means by which to gain an understanding of the situation of Pasifika at the University was to listen to the voices of the University's own students and their families, the AVC(P) commissioned a research project to bring about a better understanding of the experiences of participation, retention and completion by Pasifika. Moreover, as Zepke, et al. (2005, p.21) note, while general guidelines on student retention are useful, individual institutions face unique "retention issues" and must therefore identify and act on findings regarding their own specific institutional issues "in addition to using general guidelines to improving retention".

This paper shares the story of ‘research in action’ specifically undertaken at The Victoria University of Wellington between 2011 and 2013, and is presented as an example of how the University has sought to actively bridge the gap between research and practice. By ‘research in action’ we refer to the process of translating research outcomes concerning Pasifika success in higher education into actions in a real world higher education context. As a result of this ‘research in action’, the University has set goals, established targeted responses, and its faculties and central service units have taken concrete actions towards the long-term, research-led changes necessary for widening participation, and increasing retention and completion by Pasifika.

### **Preparing the ground**

A significant feature of the ‘research in action’ was that it was commissioned, led, carried out, and contributed to by Pasifika at the University. Moreover, significant efforts were made to ensure that the project enjoyed cross-faculty ownership and support from both Pasifika and non-Pasifika alike from all levels at the University, particularly senior management. Engendering this institution-wide ownership and support was vital both during and after the research. As well as being Pasifika led and supported by non-Pasifika, the research and process was future-looking, focused on outcomes, aiming at change, and designed to inform strategies to be taken up across the *whole* University.

All of this was possible as a result of several crucial factors being in place within the University’s context: firstly, leadership with a vision; secondly, a means to bring it about; and thirdly, a process. In response to the expressed desire of its Pasifika staff and students to have representation in the University at senior management level, and the 2005 and 2009 findings to this effect by the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit, the University created the role of *Assistant Vice-Chancellor (Pasifika)* (AVC(P)). In November 2010, former Minister of Pacific Island Affairs, Associate Professor Honourable Luamanuvao Winnie Laban was appointed, thus providing the leadership to drive the research in action. The AVC(P) role was the first of its kind in New Zealand, and was situated within the Academic Office, led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). (The AVC(P) has since been established as its own office and reports to the newly established Provost role.) The AVC(P) was tasked with: providing strategic direction and leadership; promoting Pasifika student enrolment, retention and completion; working to increase numbers of and support for Pasifika staff; encouraging Pasifika research; and monitoring the central service units and faculties that support Pasifika students and staff at Victoria University of Wellington.

The means for the research project were provided by Equity funding provided to the University by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC). The funding was known internally as the ‘Strengthening Pathways’ funding, and was for supporting initiatives directed at improving the participation, retention and outcomes of Māori and Pasifika. The *Pasifika Student Success Plan* (PSSP), a holistic, pan-University strategy for improving Pasifika participation and educational outcomes at the University. This was followed by implementation of key strategies in Pasifika and non-Pasifika areas of the University, and on-going monitoring of process, progress and outcomes. Future stages will involve the identification of key areas for further research, and the evolution and adaptation of the Plan and its implementation to meet the changing needs of Pasifika learners, the University, and the socio-cultural context within which the University operates.

## Sowing the seeds

Thus, with Pasifika presence in senior leadership, appropriate funding, and University leadership support gained, the ground was ready for the design of research focused on two important issues – Pasifika retention and degree completion. The research questions were: ‘What internal, institutional and external factors helped Pasifika students to stay/succeed at the University?’, and ‘What internal, institutional and external factors hindered their ability to stay/succeed at the University?’ The core aim of the research was to draw on the experiences of Pasifika students and their families to answer these key questions. The research was designed to afford the institution a stronger understanding of its Pasifika students, families and wider communities, as well as an authentic understanding of the University’s staff, structures and practices from a Pasifika perspective.

Key to such research was the use of collectively-focused, Pasifika values-based methodology and analysis, and a sound conceptual framework drawn from a review of international and local research on the factors which influence minority tertiary student retention and degree completion. Informing and shaping this research project was a conceptual framework developed by the commissioned researcher, Dr Ruth Toumu’a. The conceptual framework was developed from a review of relevant literature including but not limited to: Tinto (2004); Bean and Metzner (1985); Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1993); Newman and Newman (1999); Pascarella (1985); Nora (1987); Hood (1992); Smedley, Meyers and Harrell (1993); Gonzalez (2002); Swail, Redd and Perna (2003); Lotowski, Robbins and Noeth (2004); Arbona and Nora (2007); Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, and Anae (2006); Madjar, McKinley, Deynzer, and van der Merwe (2010). The conceptual framework was based on a three-tiered model of attrition which proposes that attrition factors (considered here to be the opposite of retention, and of which there are literally dozens) can be grouped into three main categories:

- i. *internal personal variables* (relating to factors internal to the individual);
- ii. *variables within the institution* (relating to factors within the institution’s physical, cultural, social and academic environment); and
- iii. *variables within the students’ external environments* (relating to all factors not within the individual or institution, and including the student’s social, cultural, economic, and physical environment).

The project’s qualitative research design involved data collection via both (i) an electronically administered questionnaire based on an inventory of the facilitating and hindering factors in relevant research, and (ii) semi-structured in-depth talks with students and family members, to elicit Pasifika insights into the facilitating and hindering factors experienced during their time at Victoria University of Wellington.

Ethical approval for the research was sought and received from the University’s Human Ethics Committee and, in addition to this, the project was based on core, shared, Pasifika cultural values – relationship, respect, reciprocity, commitment to current and future collective good, and generosity – as are documented and defined in Pasifika research guidelines such as Anae et al. (2001) and the Health Research Council (2004). These values were evidenced also in the way in which the researcher, research team, and participants acted and interacted within the study. They were also evident in the process of engagement with the faculties and central service units for the subsequent development of the Victoria University of Wellington *Pasifika Student Success Plan* (PSSP).

Since 'Pasifika' is a term embracing such diversity, care was taken to incorporate this diversity within the student participant sample in terms of Pacific ethnicity, age and sex, and faculty represented within the University. Participants self-reported their ethnicity as being from more than seven Pacific nations (Samoa, Cook Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Fiji, Niue, and Other Pacific), and were recruited from each of the six University faculties. The participants were all domestic students (not scholarship or international students). Furthermore, it was considered important that the research heard and recorded the voices of both 'achieving' Pasifika students (those students who had successfully stayed in study at the University and completed their degree) and 'non-achieving' Pasifika students (those who had not been retained or completed their degree). The 'non-achieving' students were students who, due to prolonged poor academic outcomes, were suspended from further study at the University for a certain period (usually 2 years, and after which they were able to re-enrol).

A total of 27 'achieving' and 11 'non-achieving' students took part. In all, 38 Pasifika students and four Pasifika families participated in the research, and contributed their personal insights into what went right and what went wrong in their learning journeys at the University. Participants expressed the hope that what they shared (which was sometimes very personal and/or difficult) would be utilised for the benefit of subsequent and future Pasifika students at Victoria University of Wellington.

### **Nurturing the new shoots**

From this conceptual framework and participant selection basis, the research was carried out by the Researcher and a Research Assistant. In keeping with the commitment to University-wide involvement, the research was undertaken with the advice and guidance of a mentor (senior academic) of the Researcher's choice, an additional advisor of the AVC(P)'s choice, and a formal advisory team composed of senior academics nominated by the Pro Vice-Chancellors (PVCs) of each of the faculties of the University. Upon completion, the research project's main findings were presented in a report, and arranged according to the project's three conceptual categories: internal, institutional and external factors. The most salient of these findings are now briefly described.

In terms of the main *internal factors* influencing Pasifika students' ability to stay at university and persist through to degree completion, the participants highlighted personal maturity and independence as key factors. The Pasifika participants also pointed to the vital importance of having goal clarity; strong reasons for being at university, and clear reasons for doing well.

*"I came from a separated family who have struggled financially for most of my life so the motivation to be independent, be able to earn a decent salary and not go down that same track played a large role in my motivation to succeed and complete my degree. Ultimately, I knew what I didn't want in life..."*

*"And I told my family that once I've completed my tertiary education, I'm heading back to Auckland, and I want to work with the Pacific community."*

*"It's not disrespecting your culture to be ambitious for yourself and to achieve your goals. I honour my family with my achievements. Show respect to mothers and fathers that work two or more jobs just to put food on the table and a roof over your head, by believing in yourself and what you can achieve. Because they are the ones that gave you the opportunity, now you have to use it."*

The Pasifika participants attributed considerable weight to the role that personal internal characteristics, skills and attitudes played in their achievement or lack thereof, and placed less emphasis on the effects of institutional and external factors than may have been expected.

*“For me, I’m not a person who shifts the blame. So if I didn’t, then it’s my fault. If I didn’t pass or anything like that.”*

Foremost amongst these personal factors was the perception that they had been under-prepared for tertiary study, particularly in terms of academic literacy, study skills and habits, and knowledge about what university life was like and what would be expected of them in order to succeed.

Important also for retention was the ability to negotiate and achieve balance between home, life and study demands, as well as the ability to create and draw on strong support networks. Possessing help-seeking skills and attitudes, and active participation were also considered important, but more traditionally raised participants expressed the view that these characteristics did not always sit naturally with certain strong, culturally determined inhibitors such as ‘shame’ (fear of loss of face) and/or ‘respect’ (initial reluctance to question authority publicly, especially when interpersonal relationships of trust have not been deliberately cultivated in the learning environment).

*“I think it’s hard for Pacific people to talk about failure, or not achieving what we set out to achieve. So it’s better for us to put on a smile and say ‘Yup, everything’s all good’ than actually tell the truth and say ‘No, I need help.’”*

*“I never really heard anyone say ‘Oh that’s a dumb question,’ so I guess it was just in my mind most of the time... Every question I had I’d just try to go back home or after the lecture go into the library and read up the lecture notes again... Obviously I spent time trying to find the answer, and that time could have been used elsewhere.”*

Participants also shared the importance of possessing financial literacy, a strong personal spiritual faith, as well as developing affective strategies for dealing with fluctuations in motivation and academic self-concept. Postgraduate participants in particular spoke of the importance of recognizing and validating their unique Pasifika worldviews, and of possessing the resilience to continue to value them when they encountered dismissal or devaluing of these world views by non-Pasifika academics.

Relating to factors within the *institution*, the Pasifika participants’ contributions highlighted the critical importance of teaching and learning factors, and the inter-personal relationships within the teaching and learning spaces. Lecturer approachability was key for many, with one former student commenting of his lecturers: *“They’re hard to approach... I think it’s their body language... or their tone of voice.”* An undergraduate commented on lecture delivery:

*“Just monotone, speaking and people leave before the class is over ... they just walk out because some of them just read off their Blackboard notes and so people just say ‘Oh yeah I can get this off BlackBoard; I’m gonna leave.’”*

Another reports a group decision to not bother attending class at all:

*“You’re just pretty much sitting there, reading the slides and reading the book and not really interacting with the lecturer. So we made a unanimous decision in our little informal group [of Pacific students] that we were actually more productive teaching ourselves (laughs).”*

Pasifika student participants in our study also spoke of the powerfully negative impacts of alienation and social isolation, very large class sizes, and inflexible assessment types on the ability and desire to persist in study. Participants reported feeling “*like a fish out of water*”, like an “*alien*”, and feeling like they were “*running around like a lost person*” in a “*very white*” environment where it was “*every man for himself*”. Also inhibiting success and retention was the absence of adequate access to Pasifika mentors and role models in the tertiary study context. On the other hand, highly beneficial to retention and persistence was the active facilitation, by the University, of social connectedness between Pasifika students through the provision of venues and the encouragement of culturally sanctioned forms of intergenerational socialisation and forums of cultural expression. One young male participant noted: “[Dance] *was like my outlet, like if I was stressed out or anything, I’d just dance and that would just bring me back to why I was doing it.*”

Certain aspects of campus infrastructure, such as the absence of Pasifika visual culture, and the necessity of commuting frequently between geographically removed campuses, provided further financial, affective and motivational challenges. There was also a clear perception amongst Pasifika student participants that there were too few Pasifika staff employed at the University, and that qualified, experienced, professional, caring and committed Pasifika staff within the institution was a pivotal component in Pasifika student success at the University.

*“Having those Pacific faces promote themselves and the services they provide, and giving their own reflections ... Those were more engaging than lecturers saying “Oh, you’ve got this service here, you’ve got this service here... It just meant more.”*

However it was by no means only the Pasifika staff who made the difference for those students who succeeded. Staff of any ethnic background who demonstrated commitment to being culturally responsive and aware, who showed they were accountable for Pasifika outcomes, and who strove to establish positive professional and mentoring relationships between students and staff, were attributed with playing a significant role in student retention and persistence; as were those who demonstrated culturally inclusive teaching and learning practices, and made effective use of ICT to enhance and increase the flexibility of teaching and learning delivery. Highly thought of staff actively fostered safe learning environments (emotional, intellectual, physical, and cultural safety), and quickly and effectively established a zero tolerance approach to expressions of racism or micro-aggression.

While the University’s student services were experienced as largely positive, there were also some tangible and intangible (often culturally derived) barriers to the access of institutional support by Pasifika.

*"I only used the library to study mainly. I hardly ever got books out. I wasn't too sure on how to search for books or use the library facilities. It all seemed quite overwhelming."*

*"... health and counselling... you can approach them in a much more subtle way almost. But with these other tours, it comes back to what I was saying before about the not-so-subtle approaches you use, and the responses you [as a Pacific person] might get in a public setting (laughs)."*

Similarly, the provision of Faculty-specific academic support was highly valued, but required considerable further development of its structures to ensure consistency and cultural responsiveness in delivery. The on campus mentoring which was most highly valued was that which utilised Pasifika models of peer and intergenerational learning and teaching.

The provision of financial advice and assistance (such as scholarships, grants, employment opportunities) offered with adequate privacy and sensitivity to the realities of Pasifika financial concerns also played an important role in enabling students to stay in study.

*"The financial hardship grant? That was of real value for me. It was good to access that. Because I really, really struggled; it was really really hard for me financially. That was the thing which made me wonder whether I'd get through or not."*

*"Sometimes not making it to school because I can't afford bus fare... Lunch contributes to the energy that you have during the day, especially when you say 'I'm going to go home. I'm hungry'."*

In terms of the *external factors* affecting Pasifika student ability to stay at university and complete their degrees, a number of factors were identified as 'double-edged swords'; positive and enabling things, but which could also work to hinder their ability to stay/succeed in study. Paid employment, for instance, was a necessity for a great many, but at the same time, paid work commitments were felt to have directly hindered retention and degree completion for many of the Pasifika participants.

*"I share many commonalities with other students, who are also balancing work, study and home life, have staff responsibilities and the lecturers have an appreciation of the types of influencing variables that can affect our abilities to meet study commitments. This makes me feel supported and motivated to keep going."*

Likewise, immediate and extended family, while usually a source of vital support and motivation, could also exercise culturally driven demands on time, attention and resources which made staying on at the University impossible.

*"...organising my schedule in terms of study time, family time, in terms of church time, in terms of... just rearranging my schedule, really. ... I think I'd be telling you a lie if I said it came kind of naturally."*

*"My study had a really unbalanced effect on my family, but I knew that's how it was going to be. It's going to be unbalanced for three years..."*



Participants' peer and romantic relationships were also felt to have had significant influences on study, both positive and negative. For school leavers, whether or not their high school friends had also enrolled at the University played an important role (both positively and negatively in some cases) in retention and degree completion.

External factors with a more straightforward influence on retention and completion were transport costs to and from the University, and availability of spaces and resources for study (desk, computer, internet, printing) at home/off campus. Family support and their possession of a clear understanding of the demands of tertiary study on Pasifika students' time, energy and resources were both significant. Another important external factor was 'educational legacy' (whether or not members within their family networks had also experienced tertiary education), and thus, whether the student had a role model and mentor within the family who was able to relate first hand to the demands of tertiary study and provide informed guidance along the way.

### **Tending the crop**

Having gathered the findings on the internal, institutional and external factors identified by participants, these tender shoots of understanding were then nurtured and further cultivated in the subsequent steps of the 'research in action' process. The findings began the journey of raising the University's self-awareness of how it presents itself, its infrastructure, and its daily routines to students of Pacific descent.

The research was completed and the report released internally to the University in July 2011 and, as intended, the findings then fed directly into the process of collaborative development of a pan-University *Pasifika Student Success Plan* (PSSP). This stage of the 'research in action' began with the dissemination of the research report to the PVCs and relevant senior staff in the faculties and central service units of the University, followed by research briefings and the presentation of the main findings in seminar/workshop forums around the University. A centralised research repository was set up online through the University's Library, and the research report was made available to all staff via an intranet link, with Managers, Heads and Implementation Team members responsible for directing staff to the link and the research.

The development of the PSSP from the key research findings was facilitated by the AVC(P) and occurred over three intensive workshops on 9 August, 30 August, and 5 September 2011. It was a deliberately collaborative process undertaken by a working group comprising the PVCs, Heads of central service units, a representative from Victoria International, and a representative from the Pasifika Students' Council (the Pasifika student representative body). Thus achieving what had previously been documented as missing from the widening participation scene; research which "works to bring students, academics and others into dialogue, debate and action around the exclusionary practices and purposes of higher education" and specifically those practices within their own institution (Bowl, 2008, p.187).

This working group drew on three important sources of information in order to develop the *Pasifika Student Success Plan* (PSSP):

- (i) the research findings
- (ii) the University's own statistics (current internal statistics on the enrolment, attrition rates, achievement rates, and degree completion numbers of Pasifika students at the

University, which had been previously drawn together in an initiative also brokered by the AVC(P) for the express purpose of assessing the University's current situation for Pasifika)

(iii) the Working Group's own considerable institutional knowledge.

In this way, the predominantly qualitative data from the research was coupled with the quantitative evidence from institutional records to provide a more complete picture of the situation for Pasifika.

Armed with the research findings, institutional data, and working group members' institutional knowledge and expertise, the working committee achieved the following: discussion of and response to the research findings and statistics; critical analysis of the current situation of the University with respect to its TEC defined Pasifika Equity commitments and the University's own Equity and Diversity strategy; and the collaborative setting of new 'stretch' targets for the University for 2015 with regard to enrolment, retention, course completion, and degree completion by Pasifika. Subsequently, the working group collaboratively decided to focus the pan-University strategy development in three areas: (i) recruitment / enrolment; (ii) retention and qualification completion; and (iii) course completion (pass rates) for Pasifika at the University. Having decided on these three areas of focus, the working group collectively developed lists of between four and six specific Aims for each of the three focus areas. For instance, for category (i) Pasifika recruitment / enrolment, a number of specific Aims were agreed upon. The third of these (Aim 1.3) was to "Develop a specific targeted Pasifika Communications and Marketing Plan" and the fourth (Aim 1.4) was to "Increase targeted Pasifika scholarships".

The three focus areas and their associated aims comprised the core content of the PSSP, which was then disseminated to the University by means of presentations and slideshows accessible via the intranet. The PSSP gained approval at the University's Senior Management Team (SMT) meeting on 27th September 2011, and was successfully received by the Academic Board on 6th October, 2011. Following its approval for implementation, 'PSSP Implementation Teams' were established, consisting of PVC/Head nominated teams of between three to seven key faculty/unit staff members. Implementation team members usually held positions of leadership (such as faculty Deans), had pre-existing interests in Pasifika and/or a previously defined Equity related role in the faculty/unit, and the teams also often included staff with a role relating to managing of faculty/unit statistics. The team composition thus enhanced the likelihood of the influence, commitment, traction, and access to resources necessary for effective implementation. These PVC nominated groups in each faculty were to become the key liaison groups with the AVC(P) office for the on-going implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the PSSP throughout the University.

In the months following the PSSP's collaborative creation and dissemination, the Researcher liaised continuously with the PSSP Implementation Teams across the University faculties, Victoria International, and central service units. Each Implementation Team (one for each faculty and each central service unit) worked to develop lists of specific, time-bound, measurable, and budgeted for initiatives which would directly contribute to specific areas covered by the PSSP Aims that their faculty/unit had jurisdiction over. Each faculty's PVC (or central service unit Head/Director) then approved these specific planned initiatives, thus pledging their faculty's/unit's contribution towards Pasifika enrolment, retention and degree completion, and course completion.

The outcome of this on-going collaboration was a single document known as the *PSSP Implementation Plan*, comprehensively listing all the initiatives to which each faculty and central service unit had committed, the timeframes involved, the key lead persons, and the proposed on-going monitoring, reporting and evaluating systems which were to be used to track progress and outcomes. The final stage involved releasing this single document to the University staff at all levels, to enable them to see what other faculties/units had committed to, and to identify opportunities for collaboration to accomplish the University's goals and the stretch targets for Pasifika in the next few years ahead.

### **Celebrating and sharing the harvest**

For Pacific peoples, after having sown, tended, and harvested, the proof of the cultivation process is in how the crop nourishes the family and wider village – i.e. whether it is making a difference for Pasifika at Victoria University of Wellington. Bowl (2008, p.189) reminds us that “One problem with research which claims to be directed towards *change* is identifying when and for whom change has taken place, and whether and for whom change is desirable (Gore, 1993).” Clearly, to ascertain the progress and effects of such change requires on-going research within the institution. What can be claimed at this stage though is that the findings have allowed the University a hitherto unattained insight into the *personal* and *external* factors which the institution needs to be mindful of. Most importantly, it has highlighted those factors *within the institution* itself which hinder Pasifika success, and which the University is at liberty to directly address. It is pleasing therefore, at the three year mark in this process, to report on a selection of the many University-wide initiatives and outcomes to date.

In response to the need for Pasifika staff recruitment and retention, a *Pasifika Staff Success Plan* has been developed to support and complement the student focused PSSP. In response to the need for greater connectedness to Pasifika communities, University-Community partnerships have been developed. In acknowledgement of the need for a single source of Pasifika information the *Pasifika @ Vic* Website was designed and launched. Furthermore, in response to the need to connect researchers with a vested interest in the Pacific, the *Pasifika Researchers' Network* was established.

In answer to student and family concerns regarding the affordability of tertiary education, work has been undertaken in collaboration with the Scholarships Office to facilitate access to databases containing Pasifika related scholarships. AVC(P) collaborations with Victoria International and the University's Business School and the Young Enterprise Scheme (YES) have resulted in new scholarships and Pasifika awards for academic excellence.

In direct response to the research findings regarding the importance of adequate study and social spaces on campus, the AVC(P) and team have worked in partnership with the faculties to establish five additional Pasifika spaces in the Library, and Faculties of Education, Law, and Commerce. These spaces are rich in Pacific visual culture and comfortably and practically furnished, allowing transformation for a number of uses. The most prized of these endeavours being, in partnership with the University's Facilities Management unit, the refurbishment of a two storey villa which now serves as a hub of academic, social and cultural nourishment to Pasifika (and other) students on campus.

In looking at the impact of these, and a host of other important changes, on the statistics relating to Pasifika participation and success at the University, some modest but pleasing results were reported at the end of 2013. Pasifika enrolments at Victoria University

of Wellington had increased from 5.1% of its domestic enrolments in 2011 to 5.3% in Trimester 1, 2013. Enrolment of Pasifika as a percentage of international student enrolments at the University had increased from 3.0% in 2012 to 3.4% in Trimester 1, 2013. Pasifika enrolment in the target faculties of Architecture and Design, and Music, had increased from 3.0% and 2.5% respectively in 2011 to 3.5% and 4.1% respectively in Trimester 1, 2013.

In terms of percentage pass rates, the overall pass rates for Pasifika students at the University had risen from 67.8% in 2011 to 70.3% in 2013. Pass rates in the Faculty of Architecture and Design had risen from 74.5% in 2011 to 84.1% in 2013. In the Faculty of Commerce and the Faculty of Education, pass rates for Pasifika rose from 66.8% and 78.3% respectively in 2011, to 71.0% and 81.1% respectively in 2013. The pass rates for Pasifika within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences saw an increase from 66.8% in 2011 to 70.2% in 2013. Likewise, in the New Zealand School of Music, Pasifika domestic student pass rates rose from 51.3% in 2011 to 62.9% in 2013.

## Conclusion

Overall, the commissioned research revealed key inhibiting and facilitating factors internal to the student, present within the institution, and present in the external environments of the Pasifika students. These findings were consistent with broad themes in international and local New Zealand research on the experiences of ethnic minority students. The findings, and the process of ‘research in action’ into which they fitted, have brought about the cultivation of a whole of University approach to the widening of Pasifika student participation, retention and degree completion at Victoria University of Wellington.

The authors present this account of the ‘research in action’ at Victoria University of Wellington to encourage institutions desiring to cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves as a culturally responsive institution; to better know, understand and respond to their Pasifika (or other ‘non-traditional’) students’ experiences, lives and families; and identify their own areas of strength and weakness in contributing to the participation, retention, success and completion of these students. It is a deliberately inclusive, collaborative and participatory approach to ‘research in action’, and a way for Pasifika voices to be strong and heard, and for Pasifika knowledge and experience to underpin all approaches to meeting their needs and celebrating their success within the University.

The Victoria University of Wellington is not at its destination yet, but it is in the process of continual and cyclical cultivation, with the aim of becoming a University that knows and responds actively to its Pasifika students and their families. The journey is a long one; however the approach the University is now committed to was well expressed by a Ni-Vanuatu Pasifika staff member when quoting a vernacular proverb:

*“Every day your hands must touch the soil”* (English translation).

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